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Temple Beth-El

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Temple Beth-El

by Andre Santamaria

On October 23rd, I attended a service at the Temple Beth'el located at the heart of Richmond at 3330 Grove Avenue, Richmond, VA 23221. The community in the surrounding area is very peaceful and full of life. Many people venture to the Temple to attend the services held Fridays 6-7pm and Saturdays 10am-12-pm. The service I attended was Friday 6-pm.

As far as the appearance goes, I can only compare the outside to a sort of safe haven located in the middle of the city. It is very easy to recognize due to the primarily white building and large steps leading to the inside. There is also a very large congregation that socializes outside of the building prior to the start of the service. Concerning the inside of the Temple my experience of the actual service would most definitely differ from many other newcomers to the temple. You see I did not actually get to observe the inside of the temple due to a large police presence in the neighborhood. The cause of all the commotion was the fact that the regular security guard found a very suspicious looking backpack left in the back alley behind the Temple. Taking precautionary measures, the guard called the authorities who in turn called the firefighters and bomb squad to make sure that there weren't any explosives in the backpack. Due to this turn of events the Rabbi opted to have an impromptu service out in front of the neighboring building next to the Temple. They proceeded with their daily prayer and sadly a young girl who was having

her Bat Mitzvah the following day had to settle with reading the excerpts of the Torah among the many out noises of Richmond traffic at 6pm on a Friday. There was a woman that was graciously enough to explain all parts of the service including the reasons why in certain prayers the Rabbi instructs the congregation to face a certain direction. The reason that many Jewish members faced to the East is that just like magnets the Jews believe that their hearts are automatically inclined to seek the holiness in the world which to them means facing the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Also, she explained that the reason that Jewish members wear was that this was their way of honoring the presence of God. A historic Rabbi by the name of Yosef Karo stated that "Jewish men should cover their heads and should not walk more than four cubits bareheaded. As I continued observing the congregation I felt a bit uncomfortable seeing that many people were not that engaged and reverent to the proceedings taking place. Many men in suits were having side conversations and not paying attention. In many aspects the service was held in a very ritualistic manner. This was confirmed by my interpreter when she said that there is a book called the siddur from where all of the songs of worship are written and through given time those who grow up in Judaism learn them. The ending of the service was somewhat abrupt due to the circumstances and location with the Rabbi leading a prayer to bless the young lady and wish for nothing but the best for her Bat Mitzvah which was

to come the following day. After the prayer was done the congregation dispersed and the service concluded. •

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